

INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT

BY
JOHN GALSWORTHY

CAMBRIDGE
W. HEFFER & SONS LTD.
1923

*All profit from the sale of this pamphlet will be given to
the League of Nations Union.—J.G.*

PRICE SIXPENCE NET.

INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT.

“The exchange of international thought is the only possible salvation of the world.”

To those who, until 1914, believed in civil behaviour between man and man, the war and its ensuing peace brought disenchantment. Preoccupied with the humarer pursuits, and generally unfamiliar with the real struggle for existence, they were caught napping. The rest of mankind have experienced no particular astonishment—the doing-down of man by man was part of daily life, and when it was done collectively they felt no spiritual change. It was dreadful but—in a word—natural. This may not be a popular view of human life in the mass, but it is true. Average life is a long fight; this man’s success is that man’s failure; co-operation and justice are only the palliatives of a basic, and ruthless, competition. The disenchantment of the few would not have mattered so much but for the fact that they were the nerves and voice of the community. Their histories, poems, novels, plays, pictures, treatises, sermons, were the expression of what we call civilisation. And disenchanted philosophers, though by so much the nearer to the truths of existence, are by that much, perhaps, the less useful to human nature. We need scant reminder of a truth always with us, we need rather perpetual assertion that the truth might with advantage be, and may possibly with effort become, not quite so unpleasant. Though we ought to look things in the face, a fine afflatus is the essence of ethical philosophy.

It is a pity, then, that philosophy is, or has been, draggletailing—art avoiding life, taking to contraptions of form and colour signifying nothing; literature driven in on itself, or running riot; science more hopeful of perfecting poison

gas than of abating coal-smoke or curing cancer; that religion should incline to tuck its head under the wing of spiritualism; that there should be, in fact, a kind of tacit abandonment of the belief in life. Sport, which still keeps a flag of idealism flying, is perhaps the most saving grace in the world at the moment, with its spirit of rules kept, and regard for the adversary, whether the fight is going for or against. When, if ever, the fair-play spirit of sport reigns over international affairs, the cat force which rules there now will slink away and human life emerge for the first time from jungle.

Looking the world in the face, we see what may be called a precious mess. Under a thin veneer—sometimes no veneer—of regard for civilisation, each country, great and small, is pursuing its own ends, struggling to rebuild its own house in the burnt village. The dread of confusion-worse-confounded, of death recrowned, and pestilence revivified, alone keeps the nations to the compromise of peace. What chance has a better spirit?

“The exchange of international thought is the only possible salvation of the world,” are the words of Thomas Hardy, and so true that it may be well to cast an eye over such mediums as we have for the exchange of international thought. “The Permanent Court of International Justice”; “The League of Nations”; “The Pan-American Congress”; certain sectional associations of this nation with that nation, tarred somewhat with the brush of self-interest; sporadic international conferences concerned with sectional interests; and the recently founded P.E.N. Club, an international association of writers with friendly aims, but no political intentions. These are about all, and they are taken none too seriously by the peoples of the earth. The salvation of a world in which we all live, however, would seem to have a certain importance. Why, then, is not more attention paid to the only existing means of salvation? The argument for neglect is much as follows: Force has always ruled human life—and always will. Competition is basic. Co-operation and justice succeed, indeed, in definite communities so far as to minimise the grosser

forms of crime, but only because general opinion within the ring fence of a definite community gives them an underlying force which the individual offender cannot withstand. There is no such ring-fence round nations, therefore no general opinion, and no underlying force to ensure the abstention of individual nations from crime—if, indeed, transgression of laws which are not fixed can be called crime.

This is the average hard-headed view at the moment. If it is to remain dominant, there is no salvation in store for the world. “Why not?” replies the hard-head: “It always has been the view, and the world has gone on?” Quite true! But the last few years have brought a startling change in the conditions of existence—a change that has not yet been fully realised. *Destructive science has gone ahead out of all proportion.* It is developing so fast that each irresponsible assertion of national rights or interests brings the world appreciably nearer to ruin. Without any doubt whatever, the powers of destruction are gaining fast on the powers of creation and construction. In old days a thirty years’ war was needed to exhaust a nation; it will soon be (if it is not already) possible to exhaust a nation in a week by the destruction of its big towns from the air. The conquest of the air, so jubilantly hailed by the unthinking, may turn out the most sinister event that ever befell us, simply because *it came before we were fit for it*—fit to act reasonably under the temptation of its fearful possibilities. The use made of it in the last war showed that; and the sheep-like refusal of the startled nations to face the new situation, and unanimously ban chemical warfare and the use of flying for destructive purposes, shows it still more clearly. No one denies that the conquest of the air was a great—a wonderful—achievement; no one denies that it could be a beneficent achievement if the nations would let it be. But mankind has not yet, apparently, reached a pitch of decency sufficient to be trusted with such an inviting and terribly destructive weapon. We are all familiar with the argument: Make war dreadful enough, and there will be no war. And we none of us believe in it. The last war

disproved it utterly. Competition in armaments has already begun, among men who think, to mean competition in the air. Nothing else will count in a few years' time. We have made by our science a monster that will devour us yet, unless by exchanging international thought, we can create a general opinion against the new powers of destruction so strong and so unanimous that no nation will care to face the force which underlies it.

A well-known advocate of the League of Nations said the other day: "I do not believe it necessary that the League should have a definite force at its disposal. It could not maintain a force that would keep any first-rate power from breaking the peace. Its strength lies in the use of publicity; in its being able to voice universal disapproval with all the latent potentiality of universal action."

Certainly, the genuine publication of all military movements and developments throughout the world, the unfathoming and broadcasting of destructive inventions and devices, would bring us nearer to salvation than any covenant can do. If the world's chemists and the world's engineers would hold annual meetings in a friendly spirit, for the salvation of mankind! If they could agree together that to exercise their ingenuity on the perfecting of destructive agents for the use of governments was a crime; to take money for it a betrayal of their species! If we could have such exchange of international thought as that, then indeed we might hear the rustle of salvation's wings. And—after all—why not? The answer to the question: Is there to be happiness or misery, growth or ruin for the human species, does not now lie with governments. Governments are competitive trustees for competitive sections of mankind. Put destruction in their hands and they will use it to further the interests of those for whom they are trustees; just as they will use and even inspire the spiritual poison gas of pressmen. The real key to the future is in the hands of those who provide the means of destruction. Are scientists (chemists, inventors, engineers) to be Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Japanese, Russians, before they are men, in this

matter of the making of destruction? Are they to be more concerned with the interests of their own countries, or with the interests of the human species? That has become the question they have to answer now that they have for the first time the future of the human race within their grasp. Modern invention has taken such a vast stride forward that the incidence of responsibility is changed. It rests on Science as it never did before; on Science, and on—Finance. There again the exchange of international thought has become terrifically important. The financiers of the world, for instance, in the light of their knowledge, under the pressure of their difficulties, out of the motive of mutual aid, could certainly devise some real and lasting economic betterment of the present ruination, if only they would set to work steadily, not spasmodically, to exchange international thought.

The hard-head's answer to such suggestions is: "Nonsense! Inventors, chemists, engineers, financiers, all have to make their living, and are just as disposed to believe in their own countries as other men. Their pockets and the countries who guarantee those pockets, have first call on them." Well! That has become the point. If neither Science nor Finance will agree to think internationally, there is probably nothing for it but to kennel-up in disenchantment, and wait for an end which can't be very long in coming—not a complete end, of course, say—a general condition of affairs similar to that in the famine provinces of Russia.

It is easy to be pessimistic, and easy to indulge in cheap optimism; to steer between the two is hard. We still have a chance of saving and improving such civilisation as we have; but this chance depends on how far we succeed in exchanging international thought in the next few years. To some the word international has a socialistic, even communistic, significance. But, as here used, it has nothing whatever to do with economic theories, class divisions, or political aims. The exchange of international thought which alone can save us, is the exchange of thought between *craftsmen*—between the statesmen of the different countries;

the lawyers of the different countries; the scientists, the financiers, the writers of the different countries. We have the mediums of exchange (however inadequately made use of) for the statesmen and the lawyers; but the scientists (inventors, chemists, engineers) and the financiers, the two sets of craftsmen in whose hands the future of the world chiefly lies, at present lack adequate machinery for the exchange of international thought, and adequate conception of the extent to which world responsibility now falls on them. If they could once realise the supreme nature of that responsibility, the battle of salvation should be half won.

Coming to the exchange of international thought in my own craft, there seem three ways in which writers, as such, can help to ease the future of the world. They can be friendly and hospitable to the writers of other countries—and for this purpose exists the international P.E.N. Club, with its many and increasing branches. They can recognise and maintain the principle that works of the imagination, indeed all works of art, are the property of mankind at large, and not merely of the country of their origin; that to discontinue (for example) during a war with Germany the reading of German poetry, the listening to German music, the looking at German pictures, was a harmful absurdity which should never be repeated. Any real work of art, however individual and racial in root and fibre, is impersonal and universal in its appeal. Art is one of the great natural links (perhaps the only great natural link) between the various breeds of men, and to scotch its gentling influence in time of war is to confess ourselves still apes and tigers. Only writers can spread this creed, only writers can keep the door open for art during national feuds; and it is their plain duty to do this service to mankind.

The third and greatest way in which the writer can ease the future is simply stated in the words: Fair Play. The power of the Press is a good third to the powers of Science and Finance. If the Press, as a whole, never diverged from fair report; if it refused to give unmeasured service to party or patriotic passion; if it played the game as Sport

plays it—what a clearance of the air! At present, with, of course, many and distinguished exceptions, the Press in every country plays the game according to rules of its own which have too little acquaintance with those of sport.

The Press is manned by a great crew of writers, the vast majority of whom have in private life a higher standard of fair play than that followed by the Press ship they man. They would, I believe, be the first to confess that. Improvement in Press standards of international and political fair play can only come from the individual writers who make up the Press. And such reform will not come until editors and journalists acquire the habit of exchanging thought internationally, of broadening their minds and hearts with other points of view, of recognising that they must treat as they would themselves be treated. Only, in short, when they do as they would, most of them, individually choose to do, will a sort of word-miasma cease to breed international agues and fever. We do not commonly hold, in private life, that ends justify means. Why should they be held to justify means in Press life—why should report so often be accepted without due examination when it is favourable to one's views; rejected without due examination when it is unfavourable; why should the other side's view so often be burked; and so on, and so on? The Press has great power and professes high ideals; it has much virtue; it does great service; but it does greater harm when, for whatever reason, it diverges from truth, or from the principles of fair play.

To sum up, Governments and Peoples are no longer in charge. Our fate is really in the hands of the three great Powers—Science, Finance and the Press. Underneath the showy political surface of things, those three great Powers are secretly determining the march of the nations; and there is little hope for the future unless they can mellow and develop on international lines. In each of these departments of life there must be men who feel this, as strongly as the writer of these words. The world's hope lies with them; in the possibility of their being able to institute a sort of craftsman's trusteeship for mankind—a new triple alliance, of Science, Finance and the Press, in service to a new idealism.

Nations, in block, will never join hands, never have much in common, never be able to see each others' points of view. The outstanding craftsmen of the nations have a far better chance of seeing eye to eye; they have the common ground of their craft, and a livelier vision. What divides them at present is a too narrow sense of patriotism, and—to speak crudely—money. Inventors must exist; financiers live; and papers pay. And, here, Irony smiles. Though Science, Finance and the Press at present seem to doubt it, there is, still, more money to be made out of the salvation of mankind than out of its destruction; a better and a more enduring livelihood for these three Estates. And yet without the free exchange of international thought, we may be fairly certain that the present purely national basis of their livelihoods will persist, and if it does the human race will not, or at least so meagrely that it will be true to say of it, as of Anatole France's old woman: 'It lives but so little!'

